



## *Raúl Benítez Zenteno* (1931-2006)

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A few days before he turned 75, Raúl Benítez, a member of a generation who developed demography in this country, died in Mexico City. He was part of a group of citizens who from their institutions called attention to the problems of population growth. They prompted government to design a comprehensive policy to deal with these problems through the General Population Law and to create the bodies responsible for putting this policy into practice.

Raúl Benítez Zenteno was the first Mexican to be educated in the Latin American Center

for Demography thanks to a fellowship he was given when he was already a member of the UNAM Institute for Social Research that he would later direct.

His contributions to the social sciences and Mexican society's knowledge were both diverse and very significant. It is worthwhile remembering some of them.

Commissioned by Mexico's Central Bank, together with his colleague and lifelong friend Gustavo Cabrera, he developed Mexico's first population projections, valid for many years and a fundamental input for economic planning.

This scientific work became even more important because he did it at a time when the necessary statistical information was scanty and

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Photo courtesy of Raúl Benítez Manaut.

of low quality. Therefore, he needed to use all the tools of demographic analyses and the suppositions of so-called theoretical populations; through observable relations between fundamental demographic variables in conditions of stability or quasi-stability, like those of the Mexican population until the 1960s, they made indirect estimates about fertility. In addition, what today may be a relatively simple exercise using computer tools and statistical packages that work on practically any personal computer, at that time were demographic calculations that all had to be done by hand, since they did not even have electronic calculators.

The intellectual efforts of demographers like Benítez Zenteno to establish the basis for modern demography cannot be sufficiently appreciated if we do not take into account the conditions in which scientists carried out their work.

Raúl Benítez promoted and participated in large demographic research projects both in Mexico and region-wide. One example is the Program of Comparative Fertility Surveys in Latin America, the precedent for other world programs and a touchstone of the generation of statistical information that made the basis for modern population policies possible.

His idea of a Latin American project to study the relationship between the dynamics of demographics and economic development in order to understand regional history gave rise to a large number of individual projects by researchers in the hemisphere who continue to be interested in the topic.

Raúl Benítez Zenteno was also the general coordinator of the Latin American Population Program (Prolap) and the organizer of different academic meetings that resulted in the publication of a series of books on population issues and the development of an inventory of the research done in the 1990s to plan future activities.

However, his task as coordinator of international research projects was not restricted to demography; it also delved into highly significant sociological issues like the analysis of social classes in Latin America.

His educational activities went beyond his job as a professor at the UNAM and other universities

and academic centers in Mexico. He was also the secretary of the Mexican Council of Social Sciences, which supported the creation of graduate programs at universities in different states, thanks to which dozens of master's and doctoral candidates in the social sciences received their degrees and are now part of the teaching and research staffs at nationally and internationally prestigious institutions.

The UNAM bestowed upon him the well-deserved title of researcher emeritus and the Mexican government, under the administration of President Carlos Salinas de Gortari, gave him the National Prize for Demography in 1989. In his acceptance speech, in contrast with some intellectuals at the service of those in power who usually praise whoever is in office, Raúl Benítez called attention to the growing inequality among the social classes, which could be seen in the increase in extreme poverty while a privileged sector took advantage of the conditions offered by the state to enrich themselves, thus putting Mexican society at risk of entering into crisis, which is what finally happened. As Benítez Zenteno read his speech, the president left the room, unable to put up with anyone daring to contradict the official discourse that said that poverty had been "eradicated" in Mexico, which had become "part of the first world."

Lastly, we should remember his editorial work, well represented by his labors as founder and editor of the magazine *Demos. Carta Demográfica sobre México* (Demos. Demographic Letter about Mexico). He edited it for the 16 years before his death, and in each issue brought together the most outstanding specialists in national demographic issues, disseminating our national situation throughout the five continents since the magazine reached practically every country on earth.

When Raúl Benítez Zenteno died, the Population Area of the UNAM Institute for Social Research lost its founder; demographers lost a continual prompter of discussion about the most significant matters in his discipline; and society lost an intellectual whose actions to the end of his days were consistent with his ideas in favor of national development including all social classes. ■■■